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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER)

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TAGS: ASEC PGOV PREL PINR SL
SUBJECT: KOROMA SHOWS PARANOIA IN RESPONDING TO CRIME SPIKE

REF: FREETOWN 393

Classified By: Political/Economic Officer Amy LeMar for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) President Koroma called a National Security Council (NSC) meeting on October 6 to discuss the recent increase in violent armed robberies in the Freetown area. Home invasions, illegal vehicular checkpoints, and muggings are on the rise, targeting those with known wealth or the appearance of wealth. Koroma canceled the usual National Security Council Coordinating Group meeting that was scheduled for October 6 in lieu of the NSC, which he chairs, to voice his concerns.

¶2. (C) According to one of the highest-ranked security officials in the country, the robberies have been linked to a cadre of career criminals who were recently released on bail. The cadre has resumed leadership of its small crime ring, and absorbed new members who were recruited in jail. They are known for opportunism, and do not appear to target specific groups of people, such as expats or the Lebanese community. Source said that they are "notorious gangsters" who should not have been granted bail, and said that the Attorney General claimed in the NSC to be powerless to prevent their release. The Sierra Leone Police intend to re-arrest the individuals as soon as possible, but the source was unclear about whether the judiciary agreed with this plan, or would deny bail in subsequent hearings. Besides the re-arrests, the President called for Military Assistance to the Civil Power (MACP), and authorized joint military-police patrols across the country. The need for the MACP will be reviewed every two weeks.

¶3. (C) According to several NSC sources, the President stated his view that the robberies are an SLPP plot designed to undermine his leadership and popularity. Though sources felt that a MACP is unnecessary at this time, and allegedly counseled the President accordingly, the President appeared so concerned about the "plot against him" that he would not accept solely civilian policing solutions to the problem. Sources stated surprise that Koroma would call an NSC meeting, and implied that his apparent overreaction shows his deep-seated political insecurity, rather than the belief that the robberies reflect a breakdown of civil order.

¶4. (C) Poloff spoke with the UK Political Secretary on October 7, who identified his own concerns that Koroma is being reactionary and paranoid. He noted the two sides of Koroma: one a mature statesman with good decision-making capabilities, and the other a paranoid politician looking for monsters in every corner. The High Commission believe that some of Koroma's advisors are either feeding his "Dr. Jekyll" side, or failing to calm him when he tends towards irrational behavior. In their view, the paranoia is part of the political culture and his advisors buy-in to the same concerns the President has about possible SLPP strategies. The UK believes that no one in the Cabinet will steer him towards less reactionary ground, because they themselves are

paranoid about their postings, and don't want to rock the boat. PolSec said that he believes the High Commissioner needs to get closer to Koroma, act as a voice of reason, and remind Koroma that he needs to focus on governing, rather than waging war against a party that represents very little real threat to the APC's 2012 prospects.

¶5. (C) Comment: Post agrees with the UK assessment that Koroma is capable of being a strong, confident leader when he rises above becoming mired in party politics. However, believing that a gang of thugs are deliberately committing crimes to cast him in a negative light and calling a MACP is a good example of the knee-jerk side of his persona. It is this side that threatens the efficacy of his administration, because it pushes him to mis-direct resources and energy, and can have indirect negative impacts (Note: Per reftel, the more frequent use of the MACP is heightening tension between the military and police. End Note). The Brits agree with post that the only party the APC should fear in the 2012 elections is their own: the SLPP is starting to show signs of fragmentation under its new leadership, and cannot seem to elevate their political discourse to a level above name-calling. Koroma appears to lack a steady influence who can remind him that leading the country is more important at this time than leading his party. Without this, he could continue to allow his own fears and self-interest to dictate his governance style, to his long-term detriment. End Comment.

¶6. (C) Post continues to monitor the security situation closely. Staff have been told to increase their vigilance, but there is no need to alter post's security posture at this time.

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